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"THE RESURRECTION"

BY LANSON

*An Academic Clever Work of Art*  
(See page 371)

## AN ACADEMIC CLEVER WORK OF ART "THE RESURRECTION"

BY LANSON

(See opposite page)

**I**F Dalou's work which we have just considered is an un-academic work, this one by Lanson is a striking example of what is truly an "academic," mediocre and clever work.

When, for convenience, we classify works of art into great, clever, trivial and degenerate—thus putting clever works in a class beneath the great—we do not wish to imply that clever works of art are contemptible. Far from it. For many of the most charming and popular works are merely clever—compared to the really great works; and many clever works are almost great. They are often great in all but one or two of the most important of the six elements of art power—they usually fall short in the matter of truth and *profundity of expression*, like this "Resurrection" by Lanson we are now considering (see page 370).

As mere artistry: agreeable composition, correct drawing, truth of movement, clever color effects, skilful and truthful modeling of nature's forms, it is remarkable; few living men can do as well. And yet we are compelled to exclude it from the class of the entirely great and relegate it to the class of the merely clever works of art, simply because it fails in the one supreme element of art power—*expression*.

It lacks force and truth of *primary* expression because there is nothing superhuman about either the Christ face or the face of the angel; they both lack the spirituality that would have been put into them had either Dalou or Rude—not to speak of Michelangelo or Donatello—modeled them.

The angel in this relief did not come from heaven. He came from some part of the Latin Quarter. The head is that of a pretty girl, with the hair in a *chic*, clever twist, but not the spiritually beautiful face of a sexless angel. And the expression upon the face falls short of that awe-inspiring majesty which the action in which the angel is engaged would naturally arouse upon his face. Likewise the head of Jesus is far away from the powerful, superhuman head of Christ, by Rude, in the Louvre. It is the head of some ordinary French model, with a forehead a little too flattened and a weak nose. In short, compared with the heads of Christ painted by Leonardo in the Brera Gallery in Milan and the head of the Christ by Rude, it is so insignificant as to be totally inexpressive of the character of Christ, and therefore unworthy of the subject.

That is why the work lacks in the element of *primary* expression—that is, the two most important *faces* do not express the character that they should express—nor the something exalted that would make us feel they are not merely human, but superhuman, as befits the faces of an angel and of the Son of God.

Further, the work lacks force of *secondary* expression, because, taken *as a whole*, it does not radiate any of that solemnity and awe-inspiring something that any spectator of the Resurrection would have felt, and any one contemplating this high relief should feel in the presence of so pretentious a representation of so tremendous an event as the Resurrection of the Savior.

Finally, it fails in *tertiary* expression, because the

craftsmanship, though extremely competent, as is all of the work of Lanson, is ordinary, commonplace; and again because the forms are merely *copied* from ordinary life, instead of being realized *ideal* forms—forms slightly poetized or "stylized," if you will, by even a slight departure from the truth of nature or the commonplace. Hence it lacks individuality and the expression of any personality of Lanson. He was more fortunate in his "Age of Iron."

The introduction of the assertive five discs of the cactus plant may be an original touch, but it attracts attention so much that the whole work would be far more impressive if these five discs had been left out. The introduction of the unnecessary and earthly Cupid above the angel, instead of a cloud—which would have been better—helps also to dispel any underlying feeling of awe that might surge up within one. Compare this earthly Cupid with the superhuman Cupids in Raphael's sublime "Sistine Madonna" (page 135 in our May issue) not to speak of the exalted and reverential feeling which Raphael's picture *as a whole* compels in us—even though we may not be of the Faith. There is no majesty in this work. There is, in one word, no ideality, no sublime poetry. The sticking of the crown of thorns on the base of the relief in a manner as if it were hanging from a nail, and then also of the Hebrew letters, which are really petty ornaments and are meaningless to any believer in Christ, is also an error, because they call attention to trivial and irrelevant things and tend to trivialize a subject and an action which was one of the most awe-inspiring in the history of the world. Thus we see that these petty details, in spite of the lifting pyramidalization of the grouping in the composition, do not entirely save it from being slightly trivial, and they help to destroy at least the sublimity of the work. In short, the work lacks great style, in spite of the fact that the conception is uncommon. In truth that is the only thing about the work that is not commonplace.

With a few changes, this work, which has most excellent qualities, could be made most impressive, and thus taken out of the class of the merely clever and put in the class of truly great art. But Lanson, lacking the imagination or the inspirational fire, and probably dominated by the idea that "one must be of one's own epoch," failed to put it in.

This is a fine example of what is meant by "academic" sculpture—good but not faultless in composition; very exact in the modeling of natural forms—after a professional model; charming, interesting and extremely workmanlike. But it lacks high imagination and fails to express all there is in the subject—what some truly great artist like Dalou *would have found* in the subject and *would have expressed*—so it will forever remain in the class of "academic" and merely clever art.

We quote Emerson now and then because he said some things no other thinkers ever did say, and one of them, which has been quoted often before, is

this: "All nature is bent upon expression." That is not bent on slovenly, perfunctory and incomplete expression, but bent upon beautiful, earnest and profound expression. Therefore, what makes Rubens's "Descent from the Cross" the greatest of "descents" is that it is a sublime subject, composed with sublime beauty and with great care; its expression is so profound and *dramatic* that we *feel* the reality of the expression, and so, are highly emotioned. The same is true of "The Last Supper" by Leonardo, of Raphael's "Sistine Madonna," Michelangelo's "Last Judgment." These are the greatest of their kind, whatever may be their defects, because the most profoundly expressive—of the subject chosen to express, and are in harmony with the central principles of Taine's famous lectures at the Beaux Arts, in which he defined art thus: "Art is the manifestation of the essential characteristics of any important idea, more completely than it is expressed in nature." But to so *intensify* the expression of any subject, as in a drama without childish exaggeration, requires extraordinary intellectual power and self-control—the power of being bold and not too bold. We can not expect every student of art to have that power—to be a genius. If a nation produces one great artist in a generation, it is doing very well. Not all the sculptors of Greece and the Renaissance were great. The truly great ones we can count on our hands.

At the risk of repetition we will say—it must be positively said that the French Institute or Beaux Arts or Academy does not teach "academicism." It teaches *universalism plus personalism*. That is to say, it teaches this: if any artist wishes to create an exalting great work of art, he can do so only by obeying the now universally accepted *laws* of composition and expression which alone enable a man to create a great work of art, and then, when he obeys the great constitutional laws in the composition of his works—in his fundamental *style*—he can, in the superficial *manner* of executing the details, in his choice of forms or his way of modeling, violate the prevailing *rules*, customs or *conventions* of his time or school—in fact should do so if he is a great enough artist to do so successfully,—that is without falling into the absurd exaggerations of the man who tries to be original when he is only eccentric, as Bandinelli did and Rodin has done. In other words the Academy teaches that an artist should strive to be *universal* in his appeal,—in the *large* things in his work: composition and expression, and *personal* in the *little* things—the manner of his execution of details. And this teaching is founded like a rock on the experience of the ages and on common-sense.

Why then does the Academy turn out so many "academic," mediocre, merely clever artists? Because the world does not produce enough really great men able to carry out the principles the Academy teaches. That is the answer. The majority of the human race is only academic, mediocre and clever. It does not create enough great men to produce more than one truly great artist in a generation. No Academy on earth or all the schools in existence can alter that fact. How many Presidents were really great men? Mediocrity is the rule! It is no insult to call a man or a work of art mediocre. If they are clever and clean in spirit let heaven be thanked for them!

A student who enters the French Academy rises above the customs and petty conventions of that school as surely as a cork does above water—if he has enough self-lifting power in his intellect and soul to rise above mediocrity. It depends upon the man alone. Dalou and Lanson are here to prove this. They both studied at the Beaux Arts, both were taught the same principles and both were shaped as artists by the Academy and the spirit of France. Why is Dalou great and Lanson only mediocre? Because Dalou was powerful enough to carry out the fundamental teachings of the Academy and Lanson was too weak to do so. Dalou had a great mind and soul and Lanson's were mediocre. We need look for no other answer.

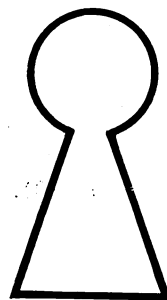


FIG. 1

To make this still more clear once for all, we will say: if the reader will turn to page 57 in our October issue he will find "The Transfiguration" by Raphael. In the composition of that wonderful work Raphael used two masses of figures, one triangular and one circular—see Fig. 1. The circle was placed upon the triangle in the composition for the purpose of leading the mind up to the most important thing in the picture—the figure and head of Christ. By this means He was made to *dominate* all the figures in the picture—the head being in the apex of the circle, around which the mind is compelled to spin, and thus we can never lose sight of the head of Christ. It was the most savant trick, if you will, ever employed for a great purpose in art. The same principle was followed by Titian in his "Assumption," by Pinturicchio in his "Coronation of the Virgin," by Rude in his "Departure" on the Arc de Triomphe.

Now look at Dalou's work once more. Notice the same law of composition obeyed—a pyramidal mass of figures surmounted by a circular mass of figures, the circular mass being the most important—because symbolizing the lofty conception of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, which he wished to make dominant in the work. He was entirely successful. Now this law is not an *academic* principle, it is a *universal* principle—made so by its use by a number of the greatest artists in greatly successful compositions. Dalou had the sense to obey this law, but Lanson disobeyed it. Hence mediocrity.

Look at his work. What did he do? He did make a pyramidal group of the composition, it is true, and put over it a circular mass. But in that circular mass he put a useless figure of a frisky little Cupid of *tertiary importance*, which should have been entirely left out or placed elsewhere in a less important position. As it is, this Cupid eternally drags the mind away from the reawakening Christ below, the most important figure in the composition. What he should have done was to have put a cloud or tree in

the place of the Cupid in such a way as to agreeably fill the space without absorbing the attention of the spectator. Moreover he put five discs of cactus on the side of the angel. What have these to do in this work? They only attract the attention away from the two principal figures. Had he put in another sleeping soldier it would have been far better. All of these things show that Lanson was not a great thinker.

Such mediocrity of thinking is against the principles taught by the Academy. Dalou could have shown Lanson the errors in his work; they were both active in the same epoch and pupils of the same Academy and were taught the same principles. We repeat: Dalou obeyed them because he saw that they are at the root of all the great works of art made anywhere since the Greeks—and so his work is great and unacademic. Lanson disobeyed these laws and his work is mediocre and academic though clever.

The Academy teaches, and rightly so, that a sculptor should reach at least the beauty of nature as manifested in the finest Greek sculpture. It does not teach that he must not go higher or depart from that, at least safe, standard—provided he does not go to ugly exaggeration. So long as he merely *accentuates*—to the limit of Michelangelo if you will—all is well for the Academy; but when he “deforms the form” into ugliness, as did Bandinelli when he tried to beat Michelangelo, and as Rodin did when he tried to rout the Academy, the public in both cases protested, and rightly so. Dalou did not do that. He departed from the elegant, *svelte* Greek forms and drifted toward the plethoric and plump forms of Rubens but not too far. So, if any one is the Michelangelo of modern sculpture, it is Dalou not Rodin, as some have said. Rodin is the Bandinelli of modern sculpture because like his forerunner he exaggerated to ugliness. And every one of their works which are thus tainted with excessive individualism are doomed to be repudiated by the cultured public.

But—to produce one truly clever work of art is already a passport to distinction; to create a great many of them—if the substance is exalting, is even an assurance of immortality. For we are already happy in the presence of a really clever, even though

academic work of art like this one of Lanson's and the others we have discussed in these pages; only we are more happy in the presence of a truly great work of art.

Therefore, to stimulate our artists to still more arduous efforts, in order to allure them to go beyond the merely academic and clever if they can, we point out the difference between the clever and the great. We do this also, so that the public may know the difference and demand of our artists the great works they might create if they were properly inspired and make ready to pay well for them, because great works call for so much more time, travail and often tears.

But if the American people ever expect to take the rank they hope to occupy in the scale of civilization it can only realize that hope by encouraging serious American artists to devote more time and effort to their work. For there is much truth in Carlyle's remark: “Genius is the capacity for taking infinite pains,” and taking pains takes time and time takes money. Hence the American people should pay well at least for its public art of all kinds, even if the result is mediocre and only now and then great. Because most of the art of the past, even of the best of periods, does not rise above the mediocre and clever.

We trust, therefore, that in future the critics of the National Academy, here in New York, or any other American Academy, will not assail the academies but criticize the works of the individual artists who exhibit there. Criticize them for not obeying those universal principles which our American academies—of any real standing—also teach, criticize them either for their weakness in not having been able to carry out those principles or for their foolishness in straying away too far from them—in their over-eager chase after “individuality” thus losing themselves in that hopeless jungle of mere peculiarity or grotesque ugliness.

Maxim: The subject of two works of art being the same, the fundamental difference between an academic, clever work and an unacademic, great work of art, is mainly a difference in the degree of the completeness and profundity of expression—primary, secondary and tertiary expression—manifested by the two works.

## I AM ART

My name is Art:  
In all the ages I have wrought  
The counterpart  
Of beauty that the world has sought.

Through endless time,  
Through joys and heart-breaks, peace and strife,  
My task sublime—  
To guard the deep desires of Life.

And when the years  
Have swept all nations into dust,  
The watchful spheres  
Will find me faithful to my trust.

R. F. Hamill